

What the Cairo Geniza Can Tell Us about Transformations in Egypt during the Early Modern Era

Jane Hathaway, Emerita,

Dept. of History, Ohio State University

This presentation draws on my open-access book *Ottoman-Era Documents from the Cairo Genizah* (Cambridge Semitic Languages and Cultures/Open Book Publishers, 2026). I will begin with a brief introduction to the Cairo Geniza, the famous collection of documents related to Egypt's Jewish community. The vast majority of these documents date from the 10th-13th centuries C.E. My research, like that of a small but growing number of scholars, focuses on the much smaller and far less studied corpus of documents from the late Mamluk and Ottoman eras (14th through 19th centuries).



I will present two Arabic-language Geniza documents that illustrate the changes that Egypt underwent during this later period. The first is a 1375 Muslim court case documenting the transfer of a house in Cairo's Harat Zuwayla quarter that was apparently located near the residence of Egypt's Head of the Jews. The house had been endowed to the Coptic church but, by 1375, had passed into Muslim hands and remained there for at least the next seventy-five years, as the document's verso reveals. The second document is a 1649 court case regarding payment of a debt and delivery of a large quantity of sugar by a regimental officer to the Jewish banker of the Ottoman governor of Egypt. What seems at first to be a straightforward business transaction between two individuals turns out to be part of the overarching process whereby Egypt supplied sugar, from a variety of locales in Upper and Lower Egypt, to the Ottoman palace.

While the first document reflects the changing demographic composition of Cairo's neighborhoods in the late Mamluk period, the second demonstrates the symbiosis between Egypt and the imperial center during the Ottoman era—a symbiosis that depended on the integration of Egypt's subprovinces. More broadly, the documents shed light on transformations in Cairo and in the Egyptian countryside during the late Mamluk and the Ottoman eras.

March 17, 2027 12:15-1:45 pm Rubinstein Commons Room 1

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